
In Defense of Kitcher's Pragmatic Naturalism

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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1. Introduction

- 1 Morality holds a central place in human society. Every group of people since the early stages of civilization, whether it's a small band of nomads or a random agriculturalist community, a highly fortified Roman empire, or a lively intellectual city-state of Greeks, has strived towards the development of some form of moral values and norms to regulate the workings of their communities. Although no inquiry has shed a satisfactory light concerning the actual beginning of the ethical system, it has been estimated that "until about fifteen thousand years ago, human beings lived in groups of roughly the size of contemporary bands of chimpanzees" (Kitcher 2011: 11). It is highly probable that, had there been no moral practice as one of the significant aspects of our lives, we would not have acquired such harmony and cooperation among our members (Tomasello 2016). Morality assisted people to create bonds with each other and embedded the spirit of altruism among us; on the other hand, it also implanted a sense of conscience (Darwin 1871) in the people, which resulted in our knowledge of the right action from the wrong action.

- 2 Kitcher (2011), in his book *The Ethical Project*, argued that the ethical values of human society do not have a preexisting ontological structure, and that moral values were rather learned and acquired over thousands of years of interdependence. He makes his claim that it is only in the gradual movement through time that society learns to create and uphold these values. Moreover, this upsurge through time is what brings progress among the people learning to live together. Kitcher paints a picture of human society as a collective entity that is and has been constantly rearranging its social structure. He sees these instances as the outcome of society engaged in the perpetual motion of *pragmatic naturalism*. In other words, it is the description of human beings in their *natural* setting looking for efficient and *practical* solutions. However, Kitcher further adds that the progression is not as straightforward as it may seem. In each phase of the process, there are problems to be dealt with. Kitcher refers to the lack of ability to solve various social problems that emerge at different times, something he calls “altruism failures.” Hence, like any other process of learning, errors as well as successes were part of our ethical journey.
- 3 Thus, in the following sections, we will look at Kitcher’s theory of pragmatic naturalism and the critique it received. Despite its notability as an extensive contribution to naturalistic ethics, few criticisms against his ethical theory have been made on the basis that it fails to avoid the naturalistic fallacy (Derpmann et al. 2013). Others like Barresi (2017) observe that pragmatic naturalism does not give its proper due to individual moral contribution by putting too much emphasis on social-level phenomena. This paper will review these criticisms and, firstly, argue that alleging pragmatic naturalism of committing a naturalistic fallacy would miss the point of Kitcher’s methodology, since its aim is not to invalidate the fact and value dichotomy by offhandedly deriving one from the other, but to show that a big chunk of observable moral knowledge is lost when we try to completely avoid it. Secondly, we will argue that focusing on social-level phenomena does not amount to discrediting individual agency. Indeed, individuals are recognized as the major drivers of progress in the scheme of pragmatic naturalism. Still, individual actions cannot be conceived in isolation from the larger pragmatic social discourse that is essential for the change to occur. While summarizing Kitcher’s theory and its various criticisms, we will conclude that most of the arguments charged against pragmatic naturalism do not pose any major threat to the significance of the theory. Overall, our responses to the critiques of the theory will highlight a crucial philosophical issue that looms large in the discussion of naturalistic ethics (Flanagan, Sarkissian & Wong 2016). The issue here is with regard to the way in which moral values are formed and universalized in our highly intersubjective world. Thus, if successful, we will have shown that pragmatic naturalism is a very promising theory in explaining different components of our moral life, which are otherwise blurred out by a pure normative discourse on morality. Kitcher’s theory also reveals that no one elite group has a monopoly over the intellectual resources in establishing a normative principle, since every member is participating in this process, and each innovation is inadvertently recognized if it dynamically contributes to the evolution of society.

2. Experiments of Living: A Pragmatic-Naturalistic Account

- 4 Kitcher (2011) starts by dissociating himself from moral realism, which posits the idea of objective truth, and from divine command theory. Thus, he is outrightly taking his stance against any “independent realm of values” in his ethical project. In order to lay down his interpretation of the genealogy of human morality, he establishes his framework of pragmatic naturalism, which understands ethics in terms of a “human phenomenon, permanently unfinished” (*ibid.*: 2), whose task is not to discover moral truths but rather to identify the existing deficiencies in society and bring out practical improvements and progress. This framework of ethics is the merging together of Dewey’s pragmatism and philosophical naturalism. The project that Kitcher puts forward can be interpreted as the further development of the vision that John Dewey had for pragmatic ethics. Dewey writes:

A complete historical account of the development of any ethical idea or practice would not only enable us to interpret both its cruder and more mature forms, but what is even more important would give us insight into the operations and conditions which make for morality. (Dewey 1902: 124)

- 5 Dewey exhibited his keen interest in the application of evolution to ethics since he thought it could make the mechanism of the moral institution more practical, which would increase society’s capabilities to solve complex moral issues. Similarly, Kitcher adapts the criteria of viewing ethics as a social technology that should be understood as a purely ongoing naturalistic phenomenon. Kitcher writes:

Ethics pervades every human society and almost every human life. People deliberate about what they should do on specific occasions, about what is worthwhile, about the kinds of lives they should aspire to lead. In subtle ways, their everyday actions presuppose habits of conduct, roles and institutions current in their societies, endorsed sometimes after serious reflection, often accepted without much thought. (Kitcher 2011: 1)

- 6 Hence, in Kitcher’s pragmatic naturalism, the ultimate purpose of ethics is to comprehend the continuity of the properties of ethics as it finds its relevance in nature. In this manner, ethical properties become a generational product. Each new generation lifts off from where it has previously landed by the preceding generation, molding the existing structure and its components, and giving new and meaningful shape to it “one thing after another.” In Kitcher’s words, “People begin with a problem and achieve partial successes in solving it. The successes generate new problems to be solved” (*ibid.*: 7). These social ties compel them to validate or develop a set of virtues or norms that will supposedly release the friction that is produced if gone unchecked. In a more or less similar line of argument, Rai and Fiske (2011) in their Relationship Regulation Model (RRM) argue that “In order for relationships to function, people need competing motives that lead them to regulate and sustain social relations by controlling their own behavior and sanctioning others” (*ibid.*: 59).
- 7 The historical analysis points out that some practice whose moral status was not pondered upon as problematic at one point in time was deemed immoral in another (for example, Slavery or the subordination of women), giving us insight into the progressive nature of morality (Kitcher 2011: 138). Variations in moral judgments do not merely suggest that morality per se does not have any fixed substratum and that it is nothing more than relativistic; rather, it implies that all moral interventions are

solutions to the necessity of the present and its problems. As a corollary, this perspective forces us to abandon the view of morality as having any independent nature free from its social-relational context (Curry 2016; Rai & Fiske 2011). Kitcher's pragmatic naturalism introduces a shift from discussing ethics as an independent domain of inquiry into moral truth to a problem-centred domain where the business of ethicists lies in the remedying of "altruism failures." As stated above, the deficiency of altruism in a society cannot be eradicated in one generation; it has to be identified and dealt with over generations. Hence, "The ethical project began in response to central human desires and needs, arising from our special type of social existence" (Kitcher 2011: 8).

3. Critique of Pragmatic Naturalism and Some Counter-Arguments

- 8 Despite the establishment of such a progressive socio-anthropological description of our ethical institution, its degree of coherence has been questioned from various directions (Derpmann et al. 2013; Barresi 2017; Campbell & Kumar 2013; Rottschaefer 2012; Sager 2014). Most critiques of the theory came from the school of moral realism, which advocates for an objective moral phenomenology. They questioned the foundation that gives pragmatic naturalism the ability to transcend its social embeddedness and gain a normative significance (Campbell & Kumar 2013; Rottschaefer 2012). Although we will not provide a direct response to the question of moral realism, we will view two other critiques that are equally significant and contribute to the debate. The other two counter-positions we will address are also the remnants of the broader objectivistic ideology. Firstly, the major critique that was put forward targeted the normative aspect of the theory, in particular, the alleged jump from a factual to a normative narrative. Representatives of this line of criticism argued that Kitcher's theory violates the age-old philosophical rule that restricts the derivation of values from facts (Derpmann et al. 2013). Secondly, Barresi (2017) argued that the method of pragmatic naturalism overshadows the existence of individuals' subjective experiences, which can often bring forth more impactful solutions to the existing problems of our society than the solutions at the social level. Let us look at these two lines of criticism starting from the first, i.e., the criticism about the *naturalistic fallacy*.

3.1. The Naturalistic Fallacy

- 9 Perhaps the first obvious critique that can be expected against Kitcher will be the allegation of naturalistic fallacy (Derpmann et al. 2013; Moore 1903; Hume 1739). This fallacy, which states that no normative conclusion can plausibly be drawn from any descriptive premises, precisely fits the bill as the main challenge for pragmatic naturalism. Before providing our defense, let us understand what this fallacy is. Oliver Curry identified eight types of reasoning allegedly committing this fallacy. These are:
1. Moving from is to ought (Hume's fallacy).
 2. Moving from facts to values.
 3. Identifying good with its object (Moore's fallacy).
 4. Claiming that good is a natural property.

5. Going "in the direction of evolution."
6. Assuming that what is natural is good.
7. Assuming that what currently exists ought to exist.
8. Substituting explanation for justification. (Curry 2006: 236)

10 Along with the identification of these fallacies, he also provides a defense against each one of these allegations, concluding that the Humean-Darwinian thesis, as he calls it, does not commit any of the mentioned fallacies. As we can see from the above eight points, the naturalistic fallacy is basically predicated on the idea that there is a permanent and solid wedge that divides the domain of facts from the domain of values. A factual statement is a mere description of the thing that is a part of the natural world. On the other hand, a value statement is not about a tangible object or a thing that we can factually describe, since we cannot see or touch them. Values are rather ideological representations of our beliefs and rationality. Values represent principles that we bring into this world to guide our lives. They provide us with directions on which we can accordingly walk. Given this difference between the nature of the two domains, it is fallacious to validate the overlap between the two. Facts do not lead to values, nor do values lead to facts; hence, there is no entailment relation between facts and values. Any two propositions that are oddly clubbed under such a format posing as one entailing the other will be committing the naturalistic fallacy. Taking cognizance of this wedge, Peter Singer writes:

No science is ever going to discover ethical premises inherent in our biological nature, because ethical premises are not the kind of thing discovered by scientific investigation. We do not find our ethical premises in our biological nature, or under cabbages either. We choose them. (Singer 1981/2011: 77)

11 Since Kitcher eventually intends to bring out the normative implication by first outlining the historical account and his descriptive metaethical framework, it needs to be done in a manner that does not commit such a fallacy, or even if it so circles through this path, it will be mandatory for him to give a justified explanation. Derpmann et al. (2013) point out that Kitcher's theory fails to meet this challenge successfully. They do so by picking up two historical instances of moral change (the abolition of slavery and the rise of feminism) that Kitcher discusses in his book. They argue:

The crucial point is that unlike the pragmatic naturalist, both feminists and abolitionists start from normative premises about what is right and wrong or good and bad. Their ethical starting point is not a description of the evolution of ethics like the one that Kitcher presents in the first part of his book. The fact that these protagonists of ethical progress can be described within the historical framework of the ethical project that pragmatic naturalism develops does not make these protagonists themselves pragmatic naturalists. Therefore, Kitcher's observation does not protect the pragmatic naturalist from committing a naturalistic fallacy. (Derpmann et al. 2013: 71)

12 Moreover, they argue that – because Kitcher understands every episode that emerges in our ethical framework as a continuing harnessing of solutions for different problems – he overlooks the various moral insights of the participants. In other words, in the process of exalting himself in the position of an *observer*, he arbitrarily detaches *himself* from participation, which is preposterous. This would still not suffice for him in positioning the normative force of his theory safely because:

If the pragmatic naturalist takes his own reflections on the status of ethical judgments seriously, he is forced to understand ethical judgments in terms of their

historical development alone, not in terms of their genuine normative force. All he can say about his deepest ethical beliefs is how humans have turned out to become the kinds of beings likely to hold these beliefs. Therefore, the normative part of Kitcher's ethical theory lacks justification at this point. (*Ibid.*: 71-2)

- 13 Explanation of morality in natural terms of such kind has often been made the subject of Hume's is/ought dichotomy (Allhoff 2003; Moore 1903; Hume 1739). This has also initiated the trend of red-flagging against any ethical theory that derives its foundation solely based on the description of nature. The above criticism is not one of its kind. Contrarily, it needs to be highlighted that the resistance against this allegation is equally persistent on the other side of the discourse (Ruse 2017; Curry 2006; Wilson 1975; Tomasello 2016; Harris 2012). For example, Ruse out rightly maintains in his adaptationist approach that morality is "an illusion of the genes put in place by natural selection to make us good cooperators" (Ruse 2017: 98). Curry writes, "the normative question mistakes the Humean-Darwinian thesis for an argument about what people believe, when it is in fact an argument about the ontological status of moral values" (Curry 2006: 242). Similarly, in explaining the goal of his book, Tomasello states: "We proceed from the assumption that human morality is a form of cooperation, specifically, the form that has emerged as humans have adapted to new and species-unique forms of social interaction and organization" (Tomasello 2016: 2). Also, Harris argues:

From a factual point of view, is it possible for a person to believe the wrong things? Yes. Is it possible for a person to value the wrong things (that is, to believe the wrong things about human well-being)? I am arguing that the answer to this question is an equally emphatic "yes" and, therefore, that science should increasingly inform our values. (Harris 2012: 36)

- 14 Although Kitcher himself does not intend to take the adaptationist path or pure scientific reductionism as a counterargument, these options always remain a tenable contender for some philosophers.
- 15 Coming back to the criticism made by Derpmann et al., we have to recognize, it is not that Kitcher does not accept the validity of Hume's Law, he fully does. Thus, he makes sure that his theory is built around it in such a way that it doesn't discredit what Hume had to say. In a succeeding paper, Kitcher (2013) responds to this by clarifying that the above criticism is based on a foundationalist epistemology contrary to his theory, which is a non-foundationalist one. Regarding the criticism that is made against his historical framework as being fallacious and lacking in its normative force, Kitcher writes:

Understanding how they make these transitions isn't a matter of answering Hume's challenge: the task is to show how, given ordinary experience and scientific discoveries, you get from one mix of facts and norms to another. (Kitcher 2013: 181)

- 16 Hence, to accuse Kitcher of committing a naturalistic fallacy would itself be an act of committing the fallacy of missing the point. The crucial point here is that a substantial conglomeration of insights that are of huge value for understanding the nature of ethics is sidelined in doing so. Ethics, if completely devoid of a naturalistic component, becomes incomplete in a way. The domain of normativity and description may entirely be different from each other, but an analysis of a normative proposition will always indirectly lead to some set of natural facts via which the norm is, although not directly derived but inspired. We can take, for example, the universal immorality attached to actions such as killing or stealing. A deontologist like Kant also found these actions

universally immoral. Here, it would be wrong to say that the knowledge of the wrongness of killing or stealing was pre-given. Even if it were the case that it was pre-given, it would not be easy to prove the argument that it was the case. The justification for it will, in some way, hugely depend on circling around some kind of factual data, either from the past or the present, reinforcing the notion all over again that it is literally not possible to explain norms without looking at some facts, with all due respect for the is-ought dichotomy. In fact, it would not be entirely wrong to say that the pioneer of the is-ought dichotomy, Hume himself, was a naturalist in many ways.

- 17 If we ask the question: what does the knowledge that day follows night, night follows day again and vice versa teach us anything special or normative about existence? A normative critic would probably resort to the answer *nothing*. Kitcher would answer the same. He agrees that facts have to be looked at as facts and not something else. But he will add that to get rid of even attempting to make any descriptive analysis will result in a loss of a big chunk of valuable insights which seems unaffordable if we are to look ahead in refining our ethical practice. For instance, Jonathan Haidt found in his research that there is a significant disconnect between people's emotions and reasoning when deliberating on matters such as morality, politics, and religion. He argued that most people make decisions on these matters based on their emotions and only justify them through reason afterward (Haidt 2013). Hence, doing a historical analysis of the ethical transitions does not in itself give us any resolution for bridging the gap between the facts and values, but it does give us some other valuable information about our moral institutions. It helps us open our perspectives to the understanding that much like the advancements in science, which are built upon the restless trials and errors driven by human ingenuity, our socio-moral world is also subject to empirical interventions that can aid us in rectifying multiple evils and shortcomings that are present in our society, things which we take for granted as categorically given. By stating the historical narrative in his ethical project, he only intends to reiterate his minimal ambition: "Understanding how we have come to do the things we take for granted, we may see our practices quite differently. Genealogy can liberate" (Kitcher 2013: 183). Values might not be entailed in the causality of our moral history per se, which is a factual description of the episodes that unfurled so far, but in many crucial ways, they are hugely stimulated by it. We learn from our history, and in order for that to happen, history (which is a factual phenomenon) needed to occur in the first place.

3.2. Unrecognition of Individual Moral Contribution

- 18 Another philosopher, Barresi (2017), argued against Kitcher that his theory of pragmatic naturalism focuses too extensively on group-level moral progress, failing to recognize the role of an individual's personal moral experience. Since often it is rather an individual who succeeds in identifying the better truth, if not the only truth. He writes:

But if it is conceded that personal discoveries of the sort can play an important role in ethical progress, then the pragmatic naturalist's current emphasis on social-level phenomena will need to be modified to give a significant role to moral innovations made by individuals in at least some instances of progressive ethical change. (*Ibid.*: 204)

19 Although Barresi criticizes Kitcher on the grounds that he overlooks the variable of individuals' "personal discoveries" in his account of moral progress, he does not do so in a manner that supports the existence of moral realism. Rather, he does so because there are general moral psychological truths that can be viewed as an objective reality across all human psychology. Here, he is referring to the emotional capacity of human beings, such as guilt and sympathy for their fellow beings, as a universal psychological truth. He calls this *sympathetic methodology*, a motivational theory that takes place in the head, contrary to the independent ethical truth that is not as tangible as our basic psychological nature. Barresi argues against Kitcher that his theory fails to give proper due to the contribution of individuals like John Woolman, whose writings hugely influenced the outset of the abolition movement during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. He reviews various works by Woolman and explains how, throughout his life, he submitted himself to the cause of others' well-being. This level of benevolence, Barresi argues, cannot be subdued under a pragmatic naturalist framework as a temporal episode waiting to be overshadowed by yet another flicker in the dialectics of history.

20 Here we would like to argue that Kitcher would not reduce such moral exemplars as someone who does not play a crucial part in society's progress. Just as we do not consider Socrates' individuality as unimportant for the development that took place in philosophy, or Gandhi's individual stand as having created no impact on the independent movement of India. Similarly, any individual from the history of such moral caliber is not reduced to a nobody whose contribution is not recognized just because it has been described within the framework of pragmatic naturalism. The crucial point is that any revolutionary insight captured by the individual will fail to leave a mark in history and hence in the existing social structure unless it is brought out in the open for a social-level discourse. Although a few individuals might have to do the extra dirty work (which they usually do) to bring change in the existing deficiencies of society, it can only manifest in reality if the other people in the group also participate. Barresi himself confirms this in his paper:

His (John Woolman) moral psychological discoveries gave him a discernment of moral dilemmas of his time that few of his contemporaries had, and motivated him to act on his insight to teach others what he himself could see clearly. (*Ibid.*: 216)

21 Thus, moral discoveries aside (personal or impersonal), it can only get its validity as a profound theory with an impact in the act of *teaching* it to others and making them see the profoundness of the idea. John Woolman's contribution would have never been recognized if it were not for the larger pragmatic need of society to bring the necessary change. Still, Barresi could be credited for pointing out something crucial that Kitcher may or may not have overlooked in his grand project. Individual moral insight can be considered a very pivotal contribution that helps in carrying forward the wave of moral progress. For it cannot be expected that all individuals will have an equal amount of moral capacity necessary to build a good society. However, we might still want to consider the explanation given by Kitcher, who, speaking of the contribution of individuals, writes "Philosophers have no final authority on ethical matters. Philosophers (by and large only) propose" (Kitcher 2013: 183). And no proposition has in itself the capacity to manifest itself instantaneously as authoritative in a given social domain, which is what Barresi seems to convey. Here, we can say that we encounter the pragmatic aspect of putting the idea to the test. Hence, over time, the idea gets either invalidated or accepted as naturally efficient depending on its workability. And it may

perhaps later get adapted into the convention too. Other than their differences regarding the participatory role of the people in initiating moral progress, both agree on the implausibility of independent moral truth hence it shouldn't create an overall problem for either of them to prompt a huge disagreement. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to understand Kitcher's intention behind his notion of progress, then we might want to cut him some slack. In his words:

Understanding the ethical project, its origins, its evolution, and the historical episodes supporting a conception of ethical progress can free us from the choice between unconvincing philosophical abstractions and problematic religious foundations. (Kitcher 2011: 170)

- 22 Here Kitcher merely intends to bring out his genealogical account of ethics. This includes firstly the minimization of epistemic distortion in the most efficient way possible when trying to understand the social world. And secondly an effort to direct our concerns more primarily to the progressive solutions to various problems than to any attempt to seek ultimate answers and close the inquiry. Every so often, we have resorted to various problematic assumptions in answering the big questions of life. Most of our assumptions about facts from ethics and religion typically tend to sideline the role that pragmatics play in sustaining and engendering the developments that take place in these institutions. Integrating the methodology of pragmatic naturalism into our knowledge system can greatly serve us in filtering out presuppositions that are not grounded in nature and practice.

4. Conclusion

- 23 Ethics, understood as the progressive movement that ultimately works towards the refinement of human practice, untroubled by the quest for the ultimate truth, is what pragmatic naturalism brings to inquiry. In our ever-changing plural world, it is only in progress that any sense of the truth can be made. So, to get the best grip on the subject, viewing ethics as a social apparatus that is always prepared to solve the existing deficiencies in society need not be thought of as the universal truth being reduced to an instrument. If the instrument can possess enough capacity to identify and refine the urgent discrepancies more efficiently than the ultimate ones, then the theory of pragmatic naturalism is as desirable as any other existing and supposedly more prominent accounts. With each new height, new ventures for greater and more refined developments make their way. If this cycle is given the push that it needs without any obstacles and corruption, then society will prosper. And behind this cooperative development, the greatest force that lies underneath is the ability of human beings to be moral to one another. If the moral foundation of any society is not fully developed and attuned, social prosperity will be unimaginable. Thus, Darwin writes:

The more efficient causes of progress seem to consist of a good education during youth whilst the brain is impressible, and of a high standard of excellence, inculcated by the ablest and best men, embodied in the laws, customs and traditions of the nation, and enforced by public opinion. (Darwin 1871: 159)

- 24 Morality envisaged by pragmatic naturalism may seem like a diversion from the standard normative pursuit of ethics. But once we start to acknowledge the genealogy of morality as a natural phenomenon that has this malleable potentiality for progress, the question of it being philosophically problematic and normatively untenable will

also cease to arise. On this account, it can be said that morality acts as an apparatus in the community, furthering the uncharted goal of perpetual progress.

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ABSTRACTS

Philip Kitcher, in his book *The Ethical Project* (2011), outlined an ethical theory built on the foundation of *pragmatic naturalism*. In it, he tries to merge the pragmatism of John Dewey and the philosophy of naturalism. Despite its notability as an extensive contribution to naturalistic ethics, few criticisms against his ethical theory have been made on the basis that it fails to avoid the naturalistic fallacy (Derpmann et al. 2013). Others like Barresi (2017) observe that pragmatic naturalism does not give its proper due to individual moral contribution by stressing social-level phenomena too extensively. This paper will review these criticisms. Firstly, it will argue that alleging pragmatic naturalism of committing a naturalistic fallacy would miss the point of Kitcher's methodology, since its aim is not to invalidate the fact and value dichotomy by offhandedly deriving one from the other, but to show that a big chunk of observable moral knowledge is lost when we completely try to avoid it. Secondly, we will try to argue that focusing on social-level phenomena does not amount to discrediting individual agency.

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